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THE CAPITOL LETTER

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A PERSONAL REPORT FROM THE HEARTLAND

Traveling around the country like Willy Loman—that is, promoting a book—may not be the best way to judge America's political temper. But it does have its moments, like long days and nights on "two-way radio" listening to callers telephoning in questions, opinions, and frustrations, and a political writer away from Washington and New York gets more impressions than he does hanging around politicians.

After a couple of weeks on the road—in Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and a few other places—these were mine: President Ford is down, maybe out; Hubert Humphrey is a downer; New York City is coming up; the Central Intelligence Agency is going down. I left Washington with a couple of clean shirts and the feeling that I would be taking some heartland lumps because I have been known to be critical of the thirty-eighth president. I came back thinking that the popularity, stature, and prospects of Gerald Ford are figments of the imaginations of George Gallup and the Washington press corps. In two weeks, I only heard one person say anything favorable about Ford—a man calling a Los Angeles radio station angrily said I had no right to talk that way about "Jerry Ford," that I should show some respect for his office and say, "The President," no matter how bad he was.

Instead of defending myself, I sometimes found myself lamely defending Ford, saying that, after all, it wasn't that easy to be president after spending 25 years on airplanes and at political dinners. Ford, if my reading is correct, has dug the United States government even deeper into its credibility gaps. Despite all his protestations of candor, he has not closed the lying gap of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and he has widened a parallel gap that involves competence.

Ford is probably finished because Americans who identified themselves as both Democrats and Republicans are questioning whether he's really up to the job. In my experience, that is the worst thing that can happen to a candidate for executive office. I have watched the perception of inadequacy or incompetence destroy at least five candidates without regard to creed or party: Barry Goldwater, George Romney, George McGovern, Arthur Goldberg, and Mario Procaccino.

I suspect, too, that the competence question was abroad in the land long before Ford canned James

et al. At least I heard people in places like Altoona, Pennsylvania, talking about it before the firing and before many reporters in Washington began questioning Ford's basic abilities in the wake of the Sunday shuffle. I also heard people out there who remembered that the president had said in August—at the end of his first year in office—that he now had his team, that there would be no changes in his cabinet staff before the 1976 elections.

Hubert Humphrey's bright prospects for 1976 are also a pillar of Washington's conventional wisdom, and I certainly was more inclined to believe that than I was to believe that Ford was a winner. Now I'm not so sure. I suppose Humphrey could get 20 per cent of the vote in most Democratic primaries just by putting his name on the ballot, but there do not seem to be tides of Humphrey enthusiasm running outside Democratic party dinners and offices of the AFL-CIO. As far as I could tell, Humphrey's middle name is a long, drawn-out "o-o-h"—a groan, as in Hubert Groan Humphrey. Many people I talked with remembered, vividly, Humphrey and the joy of Vietnam, but many more just remembered Humphrey being there, forever, campaigning and talking on and on for fifteen years. Humphrey may well be the Democratic candidate for president. If he is, he will almost certainly be elected. But if there ever is a Ford-Humphrey race, there may also be a massive nonvote and posters that say, "What if they gave an election and no one came?"

Another thing I expected to find while selling my body in the far reaches was the famed and fabled New York bias. Well, there certainly was some of that, but I still came away with the feeling that attitudes are rapidly softening about the Big, Bad Apple. What it seems to mean is that with enemies like Gerald Ford, you don't need friends.

New York City's sins and stupidity don't seem to be the issue any longer. Ford has managed to make himself and his attitudes toward the city the issue. Other Americans may not particularly like New Yorkers, but they don't hate us. Again and again I was asked the same question, even in San Diego: "Why does Ford hate New York so much?"

I'm not sure about that. What I do know is that he made a mistake letting it show and giving the New York *Daily News* the chance to run its DROP

ple went out of their way to say that they did not want to kill New York.

There was also more discussion of the CIA and spying in general than I had thought there might be as I traveled around. There is something about having their mail opened—or thinking that it might be—that makes people realize what has apparently been going on in the United States since World War II. There is a momentum to investigations, as there was to Watergate, and once some information starts leaking out, it is very hard to stop everything from hanging out as long as there is some public pressure for disclosure. My impression is that there is enough pressure out there to force out, eventually, whatever secrets are hidden in the back rooms and basements of Washington and Langley, Virginia.

Part of the pressure, I found, comes from conspiracy theorists—and there seem to be a lot of them out there—focused intently on the Kennedy assassinations and on a "plot" to make Nelson Rockefeller president. I don't know where it's coming from—I suspect the John Birch Society—but six people in California and two in Chicago asked me whether I knew of the plan to eliminate Ford by assassination or "accident." This would happen, three of them said, in February, 1976.

General concern about spying probably means trouble for the nomination of George Bush as director of the CIA, a job for which he seems to have about the same qualifications as, say, Lawrence O'Brien. But, more significantly, continued focus on dirty linen could also bring down Henry Kissinger. I have no direct knowledge of Kissinger's involvement in wiretapping and the other games people have been playing, but if that involvement is at all substantial, it will probably become public and Kissinger may become private—a private citizen. There are just too many people in too many places, particularly the White House and, now, the Pentagon, who are out to get Kissinger, and this may be their main chance.

Anyway, a little travel is good for soul and mind. Just to see the disillusionment with Washington is a doubly sad disillusionment. Sad because it's there; sad because it's justified. What does that say for 1976? It could be saying two names—one because he's talked about and one because he's not—Jerry Brown and Teddy Kennedy.

Edmund G. Brown Jr. is certainly the politician being talked about. At